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FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6366  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 1282  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0179  
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 0649  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0884  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 1173  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 3572  
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 2625  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000093

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: SHIA COMMEMORATE ASHURA WITH LARGE, ORDERLY CROWDS  
AND PROCESSIONS

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (C) An estimated 100-150,000 people crowded into downtown Manama the evening of January 29 to participate in or observe processions commemorating the Shia holiday of Ashura. By all accounts, events were peaceful and orderly. Sermons and speakers in the run-up to the holiday called for the unity of all Muslims and focused heavily on religious and domestic affairs, with little talk or criticism of Iran, Iraq, the United States, or others. In contrast with previous years' events, there were very few pictures of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei or Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah or Hizballah flags. Likewise, the U.S. and Israeli flags nailed into the street for people to walk on were not present this year. A local legal case involving two Shia activists on trial for distributing illegal pamphlets attracted the most attention among Bahrainis. The focus on unity and overall peaceful and calm behavior of participants sent an important message of discipline and restraint during a period of strained sectarian relations in the region. End Summary.

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Crowds Turn Out for Ashura Processions  
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12. (SBU) Crowds estimated at 100-150,000 turned out the evening of January 29 to participate in or watch processions in downtown Manama commemorating the death of Imam Hussein, a Shia martyr and hero, in Karbala in 680 AD. By all accounts, the events were orderly and peaceful. Bahraini police controlled vehicle traffic into the area of the marches but remained at the outside perimeter of the neighborhood. In the area itself, civilian volunteers wearing badges identifying themselves as "organizers" patrolled and maintained the peace. According to a contact, one of the most important jobs the organizers have is making sure that rowdy young men do not harass any of the women present.

13. (SBU) Sermons, seminars, and speakers in the run-up to the major processions on the 28th and 29th called for the unity of all Muslims and a focus on religious and domestic issues. Bahrain's most prominent Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem, in a January 29 sermon, swore that he would never accept the oppression of any Sunni and that he would fight alongside Sunnis "to regain their stolen rights anywhere in

the world." He complained that divisions among Muslims resulted from the policies of the United States and Europe. The Shia Clerics Council distributed a pamphlet calling for national unity and understanding, regardless of one's sect.

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No Sign of Khamenei, Nasrallah, Hizballah  
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14. (SBU) In contrast with this year's events, in previous years organizers and participants provoked government criticism because of overt displays of support for foreign Shia leaders, in particular Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah. EmbOffs present at the processions noticed very few flags, signs, or slogans referring to Iran or Hizballah, although television monitors set up along the highly traveled routes played and replayed a two-and-a-half hour speech delivered by Nasrallah from a few days earlier. Also missing from this year's event was overt anti-Americanism. In previous years, U.S. and Israeli (and even Danish, following last year's cartoon controversy) flags painted on plywood were nailed into the streets along the procession route for people to step on. Speakers mostly avoided explicit criticism of the United States, although there was much talk of an unspecified "enemy."

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Focus on Religious, Domestic Issues  
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15. (SBU) Capitalizing on a chance to connect again with constituents, there were signs and posters of recently elected Shia members of parliament hung around the downtown

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area. There also were some banners recalling a saying of Imam Hussein about the refusal to live under suppression or repression, interpreted locally to mean the situation of Shias living under a Sunni government. The most pressing local issue was the imminent decision in a court case involving two Shia activists charged with possessing and distributing illegal pamphlets during the pre-election period last November. (Note: The pamphlets carried a reprinted article by Shia exile and London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement leader Saeed Al Shehabi calling for an election boycott and questioning the legitimacy of the Al Khalifa regime.) Supporters of the two called for their release and hung posters publicizing their plight. On January 30, the court sentenced one of them to one year and the other to six months in prison (septel).

16. (SBU) According to contacts, there was a surprisingly large number of Saudi and Kuwaiti Shia participating in the processions. There is a matam (Shia community center) in Bahrain that caters to Shia from two particular areas of the Saudi Eastern Province, and Shia from other areas are free to participate in activities organized by any of the Bahraini matams. A group representing a Kuwaiti "husseiniyah," or matam, put on a particularly fearsome display as about 100 men marched carrying long swords and chanting "haidar, haidar," the term for cutting one's forehead in symbolic re-enactment of the death and beheading of Imam Hussein. (Note: The actual blood-letting takes place the morning of the 10th of the month of Muharram, in this case January 30.) A contact stated that less than 10 percent of Bahraini Shia support the practice of "haidar," and he noted that as an alternative, Bahrainis were encouraged to donate blood at one of the many clinics set up around Manama.

17. (SBU) A knowledgeable observer pointed out that Bahrain television devoted minimal coverage to the processions. At most, some video clips were shown during the news bulletins. However, the "Zahra" satellite station, which focuses on Shia religious issues and has part-Bahraini ownership, featured non-stop coverage of events in Bahrain and in Karbala.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The focus on Islamic unity, extra effort to fly flags and banners of Bahraini religious leaders only, and overall peaceful and calm behavior of participants were important demonstrations of Shia discipline and restraint during a time of increasingly strained sectarian relations in the region. Perhaps in an attempt to show the government and security services that they deserve and are ready for greater responsibility in society, Bahraini Shia intentionally projected a benign image while commemorating Ashura. However, following the sentencing of the two activists, and as Shia neighborhoods and villages revert back to the control of government police and security, we anticipate that friction and misunderstandings will inevitably reappear.

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